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The Storytelling Festival as Ritualization of the Storytelling Revival Mythos

An excerpt from Chapter IV of *The Storytellers' Journey: An American Revival* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, expected 1999). © 1998 by Joseph Daniel Sobol.

In 1972, a schoolteacher and fledgling entrepreneur from Jonesborough, Tennessee, Jimmy Neil Smith, conceived the idea of a storytelling festival in his town. Smith's primary interest at that time was not storytelling, but civic revival. He was involved with the Jonesborough Civic Trust, a body which had organized in order to promote local historic preservation and tourism. Smith was a young, energetic, and well connected member of the Civic Trust circle at the time. He conceived the idea for a storytelling festival, inspired by a chance encounter with storytelling performance over his car radio. He brought the idea to his friends on the Civic Trust Board, offering to organize and promote an event himself, with a target date of October 1973. The Trust gave him a small grant to produce it. Somewhere in the course of that weekend, the idea seemed to take on a life of its own.

In 1982, just returned from the tenth annual National Storytelling Festival, storyteller and author George Shannon wrote a letter of appreciation to the NAPPS [The National Storytelling Association as of 1993] newsletter, *The Yarnspinner*. In it, he vividly expresses the power that the festival exerted over those who were caught up in the revival passion:

The entire festival has become for the tellers and listeners a ritual of homecoming in the truest sense, a connecting point in the year's cycle. We return to a town we know, like *Brigadoon*, that is filled with magic of the finest kind. For the length of the festival (just as when a story is shared) all else ceases to exist. Time expands and deeper worlds are explored. It is a weekend spent surrounded by one's spiritual kin past, present, and future. For three days, no one has to explain their symbiotic relationship with stories, does not have to explain their vocation, avocation or passion. . . . The entire festival is, in ways, a giant folktale: being filled with familiar motifs and events

that let us know where we are in the story of the weekend and of the year, that let us know we are in familiar lands and emotions, and can securely explore new worlds. And by its conclusion, the festival has become a blend of family reunion, the child's favored bedtime story cycle, and the third brother's search through unknown lands that through time, growth and careful listening, brings him back home and richer for the journey. . . . (1-3)

In the structure of wonder tales, there is a pattern that reflects the dramatic core of the storytelling revival, as Shannon intuited. Vladimir Propp analyzed the wonder tale form thus: beginning with a blessed original condition, there follows a transgression and fall from grace, which must be redeemed by the hero's journey. S/he accomplishes the redemption with the aid of magical tokens or helpers, which are gained by inward grace, special virtues, or by difficult lessons on the way. The return journey is again beset with trials, temptations, and, often, further transgressions which must be redeemed before the final blissful reunion and communal restoration is achieved. Joseph Campbell took virtually this same analysis and endeavored to show how myths, sacred narratives, and fire-side tales from around the world tend to conform themselves to it. But perhaps Campbell's most affecting contribution lay in his enthusiastic amplification, throughout his writing and teaching, of the psychological idea that the events of each human life can be viewed through the prism of just such a mythological journey.

Anthropologist Victor Turner has written of ritual in terms that help us connect our mythic journey to the ritual pageantry of the storytelling festival:

Ritual is, in its most typical cross-cultural expressions, a synchronization of many performative genres, and is often ordered by dramatic structure, a plot, frequently involving an act of sacrifice or self-sacrifice, which energizes and gives emotional coloring to the interdependent communicative codes which express in manifold ways the meaning inherent in the dramatic leitmotiv. (81)

I would suggest that in the liminoid spaces of storytelling festivals, where the primary communal mythos of the revival is being built, the ancient story of transgression and redemption is woven again, in metaphoric resonance with the stories told from the stage. A powerful subtext of these outward performances is the wonder tale of the storyteller herself, framed by the magic circle of the festival spotlight as the hero/ine of a cultural quest. Through the pilgrimage of the performing artist's path, she seeks to redeem society from its Hamelin-like sin of denying story and the primal unity that is story's gift. The storytelling festival became, for its most involved participants, a way of enacting a ritualized happy ending to the tale of the storyteller's journey. For the teller on stage, the festival is a homecoming, a redemption, a wedding of teller to traditions and to an idealized community. For the committed audience, the festival is redeem-

ing, too: a homecoming to a kingdom in which storytelling is restored to its rightful place at the center of community life.

The ritual form of the storytelling festival evolved to incorporate echoes of many other liminal zones across cultures and time—the Mass, the Seder, the Eleusinian Mysteries, a brush arbor meeting, a tent revival, or American feast days like Thanksgiving, Christmas, the Fourth of July. But the death-and-resurrection story implicit in the conceptual framework of “revival” sets the overall metanarrative tone. At its heart, the revival story is a story of redemption, in which storytelling acts as a stand-in for the primal unities we have sacrificed in our journey of civilization. Storytelling pilgrims arrive at Jonesborough predisposed to believe that culture has fallen from grace. Somehow, sometime, we had sinned, by denying our selves, our heritage, our nature, the sacred “something” that for lack of a more authoritative word for it, we would now call by the name of “the lost art of storytelling.”

If we have not yet received the catechism when we arrive, the torrent of stories and exhortations about stories create a sense of cultic immersion, like the all-night chanting of the Mystery School, that immediately initiates us. The mythic pattern is read and enacted in the quickening of our spirits: In the beginning was Storytelling, and with Storytelling was Community. In Storytelling was contained the seeds of all the arts, sciences, education, politics, medicine, and law. As specializations multiplied, Storytelling died, sacrificed to the ‘soulless reflections of man’s skill’; it descended into cultural oblivion, where it endured as a candle in the houses of the oppressed; on the third day of the storytelling festival, by the Sunday morning epiphany of Spiritual Storytelling, Storytelling will have risen again, to return the world to Spring.

Like the medieval sin-eater, the culture’s neglect of the simple communion of storytelling is made to stand in for a multitude of transgressions; and the weekend of resurrecting the art is an occasion for ritual cleansing. We repent and are absolved. “Pax Vobiscum. Go in Peace. Next year in Jonesborough.” And in the center of the ritual drama is the celebrant-priest or priestess, the storyteller.

“Revival” is never about actual death—that story is too tragic and final. The key plot turn of a revival story is the revelation that death was only illusory, the result of our failed belief. No one believes that storytelling actually died, any more than the town of Jonesborough died—if they had, there would be no town, no festival, no story. These precious things are perceived as having been abandoned, turned from, denied; their values obscured by ignorance and neglect (which is sin). We’re then invited to repent—gently, indirectly; we’re after all most of us good middle-class late-twentieth-century adults, who would rather be caught in flagrante delicto than shouting and moaning on the mourners’ bench. But by Sunday

morning at your typical storytelling festival, we may have performed some of those same spiritual gymnastics.

In what follows, I will attempt a deep reading of the National Storytelling Festival as cultural text. I will examine the ritual form of the event using Arnold Van Gennep's sequential model of rites of passage—consisting of separation, transition, and reincorporation. And I will look at Jonesborough and the national storytelling revival scene through the theoretical glass of Victor Turner's "liminal and liminoid" ritual, and of his concept of *communitas* as the fundamental goal of ritual performance.

Speaking strictly in terms of Turner's definitions, the festival is a liminoid phenomenon: it dwells in the realm of volitional, leisure activities in a complex, postindustrial society, as opposed to the communally obligatory rites of passage and renewal in a tribal society. However, many of storytelling's most significant participants are quite selfconsciously seeking to revitalize roles, forms, and contexts from preindustrial lifeways. For these people, I would suggest that the event has had quite a different ritual and dramaturgical meaning than for those casual onlookers who have been drawn to the festival through its listing in *Holiday Magazine's* guide to the 100 best weekend getaways. The storytelling festival can serve as a laboratory for testing the adaptability of Turner's concepts. When we do, we find that liminal and liminoid aspects are actually tightly braided in the experience and perspectives of various participants at various stages in their lives and careers.

Much depends on the individual's relationship to the festival—whether they come as spectator, amateur enthusiast, aspiring professional, featured professional teller, local traditional artist or exotic culture-bearer, National Storytelling Association insider or functionary, aspiring or actual organizer of a satellite or rival festival, or any combination thereof. Depending on one's history with the organization, the festival, and the art form, and depending also upon one's belief system in regard to the ritual efficacy of those agencies, each festival can provide various levels of initiation, can generate manifold complexes of meaning; or, it can be just another gig, just another weekend. Depending on the particular psychological necessity of storytelling and of its ritual enactments in one's own life, a particular festival can operate as a vital liminal rite, a casual liminoid episode of work or leisure, or a crass commercialization of what is already, for some, a sacred process.

I will focus here chiefly on accounts from those most deeply invested in the storytelling revival—those storytellers who treated the festival as a rite of incorporation in a storytelling community, and as a rite of revival for an art through which they were in the process of crafting a presentable social identity. I will concentrate on the experiences of those for whom the festival represented not just an optional leisure activity, but a public enactment of a ritual obligation to themselves and to a consciously

conceived community. The depth and stability of these obligations and of this community are certainly open to question. Like other recent manifestations of spontaneous *communitas*, they were formed very quickly, burned brightly, and tended to scatter as inner contradictions revealed themselves, or as social and economic tides ebbed or flooded. I will take both sets of phenomena seriously: those attendant upon the evolution of a spontaneous storytelling *communitas*, and those attendant upon its possible decay.

The generalized reading of the festival below will take as its chronological reference the period of the late seventies and early- to mid-eighties, when the event was reaching its apex as a ritual center of *communitas*—even as the pressures of increasing popularity and internal competition were beginning to drown the serendipitous ceremonies of innocence that generated that communal spirit.

THE FESTIVAL EXPERIENCE

Separation from everyday reality in the storytelling festival experience begins, as we have seen, before the first story is told. At the National Storytelling Festival, paradigmatically, and to a lesser extent at many smaller regional festivals, the geographical removal of the festival site is an important element of ritual separation. As Jonesborough became truly national in scope, storytellers and would-be storytellers began to make the journey from all around the country. The effort involved became a part of the ritual and, in turn, part of festival folklore.

Many would drive together, getting off work Thursday afternoon and driving all night. Jim May would ride down from Northern Illinois:

It was a ritual for three or four years there, when I was teaching. We'd all pack into a van. Bring lots of bags of trail-mix. And head out right after school. And drive through the mountains all night—I kind of miss that part—driving through the mountains all night. I think that's where the myth began. Those nighttime drives, with friends, and sometimes telling stories, and sometimes just listening to music, and napping, and changing drivers. But going through those mountains at night, and you'd pull off the road to rest, and you'd see those lights, down in the mist. If the conditions were just right, you'd just see that mist down there, and the lights of the towns, with these sort of mist-halos around them. And I think that, as much as anything, gave us the sense of a mythic journey. The fact that it's in the mountains is important, I think. Also there was something about crossing the Ohio River at Louisville. . . . There's something mythic about crossing those rivers, and there's some big factories there, and lots of lights. And we'd usually hit that close to midnight. So you'd be in the Kentucky mountains around two in the morning.

The overnight journeys made a fertile ground for propagating spontaneous *communitas*. The time of isolation within the womb-like enclosure of the car, van or bus allowed for a build up of shared expectation and

commitment that overflowed onto the festival grounds. The all-night drives, too, fulfilled the functions of a vigil. Postural rigors and deprivation of sleep are traditional methods of inducing altered states. With the aid of this potent, non-pharmacological enhancement, the festival parade of narrative imagery could register with heightened intensity.

Even those who flew to the festival could find in the flight a liminal zone of separation from everyday expectations and rules. The out-of-the-way-destination helped. It necessitated at least one change of planes, the last change being to a bumpy commuter flight into Tri-Cities Airport, Upper East Tennessee—a field which could only handle dwarfish commuter jets or noisy prop planes with a dozen or so narrow, boardlike seats. Spontaneous *communitas* would often erupt through the natural sorting process of these festival flights. Rafe Martin recalled:

I remember the first time I went to NAPPS, the experience was, it's like I had seen the future. You know, you're flying down on the plane, and people are talking. . . . It was like, everyone on the plane was talking storytelling. In other words, people were sharing who they were. I had been on so many flights, traveling around the country to tell stories, and they're all dead. You know, it's people buried in business work—basically going over figures and files; or sleeping; or reading really dumb books. And that's it. Instead, this was a flight of people—all different walks of life, all different looks, all different ages—and everybody was talking with one another. And there weren't racial issues, there weren't political issues—I mean, it was like, "You've got an interesting story—Neat! And then you get to Jonesborough, and you felt—this was the future. People from different political backgrounds, nationalities, races, religions—all getting along. And it didn't matter what you looked like, it didn't matter where you were from; what mattered was, if you could tell a story. And if you could, then everyone was going to be there for you.

When the time on the highway or in the netherworld of airports and airplane cabins was done, there came the moment when one turned off the divided four-lane highway 11E that runs past Jonesborough's northern flank. You cruised down a road that narrows as it approaches an Exxon station, like a gateway at the foot of a steep hill. Taking a sharp right turn around the gas station, you found yourself abruptly bumping along on cobblestones, gazing up a crowded Main Street vista that has been cunningly recomposed into a living history tableau of which you were suddenly a part. It is not a closed or complete tableau, but an open-ended collage, in which some of the dominant signifiers of twentieth-century culture—power lines and corporate advertising logos—have been conspicuously banished or hidden. Others, like autos and tourists, remain in the picture, decentering it further; and others, like the storytellers in their performing colors, and the harvest motifs sheathing the lampposts and spangling the sidewalks, make up a crazy-quilt of temporal references, in

which the motley flags of post-sixties eco-gypsy culture are applied against a synchronic, traditional American background, with a sprinkling of syncretic, Pre-Christian accents.

Moving slowly up the street, past two short blocks of brick and limestone shop buildings on the right, past the Mail Pouch Building and the domed county courthouse on the left, then past the long white clapboard Federal-style porch of the Chester Inn on the right, conspicuously marked and dated 1797, you would arrive at the central example of Jonesborough's floating historical signifiers: the Christopher Taylor cabin. This two-story, mid-eighteenth-century log cabin had been moved from the outskirts to the center of town in 1975, and reassembled on a strip of parkland between the Chester Inn and the 1840s Greek Revival Presbyterian Church. The church is still a church, the inn has been restored through a state grant to be an office headquarters for NAPPS, and the cabin sits vacant most of the year, a mossy civic tool shed mysteriously transfigured by the knowledge that Andrew Jackson once slept there.

It was here that you underwent the first initiatory ordeal of the festival: registration. Fitting yourself into a line that straggled down the flagstone path back toward the street, you would gradually be borne toward the rough-hewn doorposts of the cabin. Stepping across the dark threshold to an interior smelling of damp earth and straw, you were confronted by tables of cheerful young votareesses, one of whom would take your name, address, NAPPS membership status, and money. In exchange, she would hand you, not a ticket, but a schedule, and a small, jagged-edged, calico swatch, pierced through by a safety pin. If you were to confess your puzzlement at this esoteric token, she might affix it to your shirt pocket with a soothing hand and the instruction that this was your weekend pass. You were to keep it constantly pinned to your person, transferring it dutifully from soiled shirt to clean, lest your way be blocked at the breach of a tent by one of the monitors—volunteer staff primed to stand and murmur "Pass by" to only those initiates bearing the calico swatch.

So, pinned and instructed, you walked out the back door of the Christopher Taylor cabin into the autumn sunlight, and found yourself on the edge of the Swappin' Grounds. If you were early enough, Doc McConnell would be there, capering about in front of his outlandishly painted wagon, dressed up in the stovepipe hat, frocktail coat, and clipped goatee of a backwoods Mephistopheles, warming up the crowds with comic patter while peddling real bottles of imaginary snake oil—an innocently postmodern genre of parody in which the pleasures of reference have been emptied of the tensions of belief.

McConnell played (and still plays, to a diluted extent) an important threshold role at the NAPPS festival and other Jonesborough events—the "greeter." As the first performer that many would encounter at the site, and also as chief Master of Ceremonies on the Swappin' Grounds,

McConnell took it upon himself to begin to induce the festival state of imaginative transport and self-forgetting. Being from the local area, he acted as a performing host, reaching out to strangers through the medium of his tall tales and hyperbolic patter. He introduced them to a rural, traditional world that was immediately assimilable, because entirely composed of inversions and impossibilities, offered up with an enveloping wink of complicity.

"Where I live," he would shout, "in Tucker's Knob, Tennessee, it got so dry one year that the Baptists took to sprinklin', and the Methodists just used a damp washcloth." At the 1982 festival he told of a Tucker's Knob entrepreneur named Crazy Jim, who opened up a restaurant called "Down Home":

And what he done, he hit upon a bonanza. He got in touch with all them old rangers, and them wardens, and property owners, and sportsmen out in New Mexico, and Arizona, and Texas—where they have them old hard-shell armadillos out there? And they're a nuisance out there, they claim. And so Old Jim had 'em kill all them old armadillos, and pack 'em in ice, and send 'em back there to Tucker's Knob. And old Jim fixes 'em in his restaurant, and he serves 'em, and calls 'em, 'Possum on the Halfshell.'

The form of McConnell's story here is thoroughly traditional, but its content reflects the cosmopolitan system of social and economic exchange of which the festival itself is one expression. McConnell's Crazy Jim, in fact, could easily have been Jimmy Neil Smith, importing recontextualized storytellers from all over North America to small town Tennessee, and serving them up to nostalgic travelers who want their narrative possum on the halfshell of redemptive ritual. In the restored performance context of the festival, McConnell's tall tales performed an initiatory function analogous to the one they play in traditional male societies—as narrative riddles, whose solution is betokened by laughter, and whose ritual reward is incorporation into the community of knowers.

If you emerged from the Taylor cabin after McConnell's set, you might have cocked one ear to a bellowing neophyte, while scanning the schedule with one eye and the gathering flood of passersby with the other, searching for old friends and acquaintances while simultaneously straining to plot your course from hour to hour and to prepare for the coming onslaught of narrative overload. Overload is an essential transformational mode of festival consciousness. In the presentational equivalent of the cornucopia baskets splayed across the sidewalks of Main Street, three to six tents will generally be going at any given time, plus the Swappin' Grounds, and a cornucopia of consumable storytelling books, tapes, videos, and souvenirs called "the resource tent." There is too much to do, to see, to hear (and to buy) throughout the weekend, and the more one desires to be touched and transformed by the experience, the more that

too-muchness pulls on the mind. One experiences the mass of festival activity proceeding always just out of reach of eye and ear as a kind of half-conscious stimulant, simultaneously a distraction and a spur to renewed intensities of receptivity.

The first formal sessions with the featured performers are billed as "Family Showcases"—lightweight, mixed programs for general audiences—and "Meet the Storyteller" workshops, in which performers are encouraged to speak in an informal, personal way about themselves and their relation to their art form. These introductory sessions initiate the process, essential to the experience of the weekend, of becoming known to one another, in the peculiar heightened way that we allow ourselves to be imprinted by performing presences in an intentional hotbed of expressive energy. Friday evening, after a dinner break, comes the first "olio." In 1985, for example, the tellers lined up, seven in one large tent, seven in another. Each would tell a 10-minute story. When all had gone, there would be a break. The little flotillas of tellers would switch tents and start over again. Audiences could get a taste of each storyteller's energy and style, and could pick their way with a more informed instinct among the array of simultaneous offerings in various tents on Saturday.

The olio serves as a baptism by immersion in the river of voices that constitute the festival in any given year. There is no pretense of closure—since the festival is avowedly constituted of all its members. "We are all storytellers" is part of storytelling movement catechism. The National Storytelling Festival takes upon itself the task of representing, not just the national storytelling scene, but a storytelling nation. It is a different nation than the one represented, say, on the nightly network news, a nation revisioned in the bright silver of the revival mythos. It is a nation of storytellers—of individuals, groups, and communities empowered by the knowledge of their stories and by the ability to share them and to be heard by their own and by one another's communities.

Before "multiculturalism" became an ideological shorthand for cultural work in the nineties, it was a vision struggling to be born in the gravitational field of the storytelling festival lineup. The schedule in 1985, for instance, included Spalding Gray, the autobiographical monologist from New York City; traditional musician/storytellers from Ethiopia (Selashe Damessae) and Bengal (Purna Das Baul); a professor, Robert Creed, whose specialty was reciting Beowulf in Old English; a 78-year-old retired children's librarian, Alice Kane, born in Belfast and raised in Toronto; a Pueblo Indian novelist and poet, Simon Ortiz; Mary Carter Smith, a self-styled African-American "Urban Griot" from Baltimore; Penninah Schram, from New York, who specialized in Jewish folktales; a teacher from St. Louis, Lynn Rubright, who had developed large-scale pilot programs for storytelling in schools; Connie Martin, a colleague of Robert Bly in the use of folktales as heuristic tools in revisioning gender

roles; revival performers with backgrounds in writing (Jay O'Callahan), theater (Jon Spelman), mime (Jackson Gillman), and music and dance (Heather Forest); and the great traditional Jack tale teller Ray Hicks. "These performers represent a wide range of styles and stories, traditions and cultures," wrote festival director Laura Simms in the program guide. "In 13 years, NAPPS has successfully created a place for storytelling as an important social, political, and healing art."

What Simms meant by linking those three dimensions—social, political, and healing—in her mission statement, has to do with Robert Cantwell's interpretation of festival magic. The careful calibration of cultural representation in the construction of the festival program became for her and others a potent metaphor for the ritual construction of a peaceable kingdom. Geographic, ethnic, racial, gender, and stylistic balance are not casual matters in this construction, but matters of world-shaping import.

On Saturday, the formal storytelling activities run from 10 in the morning until 10:30 at night, in all the tents and the Swappin' Ground. Each featured performer generally has one one-hour slot to him- or herself, then two or three other sessions that are shared with one to three other tellers. Sometimes these group sessions are planned around a theme—in 1985, themes included "Men's Stories," "Women's Stories," "Stories of the West," "Heroes," "Laughing Stories," "Stories With Music," "True Stories," and "Family Stories"—sometimes the theme is only implicit in the contrasting voices of the tellers. Inevitably, one is drawn and quartered by one's appetite for things going on in many separate sites, until one is forced to surrender to the narrowness of a personal agenda. Apprentice storytellers and fans pick a favorite, or two, three, or four favorites, and try to follow them from tent to tent, studying and enjoying them under different conditions, large tent and small, alone and in various combinations, watching them work off of one another and off of the energy of different crowds. It is an opportunity to be imprinted, as a teller, by stories and by telling styles that resonate particularly with one's own personality and background—that reach inside and awaken some slumbering sense of personal voice and vocation.

By late Saturday afternoon, the vision (or more precisely, the audition) of revived tradition, or of a polyphony of revived traditions all caroling their anthems under the banner of NAPPS, has been largely set in place, and the place prepared for the arrival and assumption of Ray Hicks. The staff car pulls up to the Tent in the Park, covered with dust from the mountain roads. The designated driver gets out to help Hicks unfurl his astonishingly elongated frame. His wife Rosa, tiny and thin as a six-penny nail, follows him out carrying bags of ginseng, sassafras, and angelica root gathered from the mountain, and some homemade apple cakes, all for sale. Whether Hicks is late for his show or not, he is instantly surrounded.

Children and adults, friends, acquaintances and strangers, storytellers and tourists stop to ask him questions, to listen to his torrent of talk, to snap his picture, or just to gawk. Hicks's image has adorned so many posters, flyers, schedules, programs, not to mention newspaper and magazine articles on the festival over the course of 20 years, that it seems for a moment as if the festival itself has stepped out of a car and stands waving its enormous arms between the resource tent and the road.

This synecdoche remains compelling despite the fact that no one could be less typical of the contemporary storyteller bred by the revival and the festival than Hicks. Though the festival would move more and more towards professional tellers who were quite at home in the segmented world of the weekend schedule, it still needed as its symbol a man whose stories and whose entire consciousness came self-evidently from outside that world, and were only subject to being contained within it for brief, ritual descents, one Saturday afternoon a year. The Christian ritual, by analogy, takes as its centerpiece a man who was both born in a manger and immaculately conceived. The incarnation of American storytelling in a cabin on Beech Mountain that has neither heat, running water, television, nor clocks is a similar boon to the devout imagination.

In McConnell's unofficial Friday appearances he would act as a fore-runner to Hicks's storytelling messiah, baptizing visitors in Appalachian storytelling traditions in preparation for Hicks's Saturday descent from the Mountain of Transfiguration. The difference in their repertoires is appropriate to this complementarity. Tall tales are worldly and rough; Jack tales, for all Hicks's characteristic interruptions, are most often otherworldly, supernatural, and associated with the Jungian archetype of the sacred child. Tall tales play with exoteric/esoteric code-switching. Hicks's long wonder tales, particularly in his archaic dialect, are purely esoteric, difficult to listen to, but rewarding the faithful with microcosmic epiphanies of the total storytelling revival myth.

After Hicks and his wife have been bundled into the car and driven away back up the mountain, there is a break for dinner. Food courts line the parking lot between the big Tent in the Park and the smaller tent on the hill. The resource shed, later to grow into a tent of its own, is open and booming; all the restaurants in town are full. These free, informal zones in the tightly scheduled weekend are the times when the web of personal connections are formed which will give a sense over the course of the year and the years that there is such a thing as a national storytelling community. Relationships are deepened—sometimes with acquaintances from home who suddenly become, in this weightless sphere, the people in the world who most closely share your soul; sometimes with strangers from half a continent away who catch your eye and wind up sitting across from you in a heart-to-heart outpouring all the more passionate the further

it soars from your daily life—all this in the altered, festival state of emotional susceptibility brought on by two days on a constant roller coaster of narrative movement.

After dinner there is another scheduled session, a kind of mini-olio, in which two to five tellers play off of one another in each of two to five tents. The sun has set. Stories told can deepen and darken, revealing new comic, tragic, or personal dimensions. There is a sense of immanence, of a premonitory excitement leading up to the ghost story session. The accumulated invocations of ancestors, of otherworldly visions, and of hostile, benevolent, or tutelary spirits thicken the atmosphere of dusk.

Until 1985, all other activities would stop at 9 p.m. and crowds would gather at the foot of the hill northeast of Main Street for the walk to the cemetery for the ghost telling. The seasonal approach of the old Celtic New Year, the divide between the light and dark halves of the year, when the gates between the worlds stand open for a night, adds an atavistic shiver to the natural chill in the air. In the ritual form of the festival, this is the traditional descent into the Underworld, with the storytellers as shamanic guides. It is an opportunity to contemplate the lower, malevolent, and fearsome forms on the other side of the divide of life and death.

In the mythos of the storytelling revival, the ghost telling has a dual resonance. In addition to being inevitably the most popular and profitable event of a storytelling festival, ghost storytelling is one of the last living refuges for traditional oral narrative in contemporary American popular culture. Whether on Boy Scout trips, at summer camps, or on junior-high-school sleep overs, there remains a lively tradition of keeping the darkness homeopathically at bay with hoary old legends and gruesome new inventions. So as midnight approaches, the ritual dramatization of the revival myth deepens, in a thicket of subliminal paradox. Through the imagining of death—our own as shivering mortals, paired with the projected death of storytelling as an art form and divine scapegoat—audience and art form are titillated into a state of exaltation. Though pronounced dead and buried over and over, here is the art of storytelling risen before us, reminding us that we are alive by leading us to the brink of annihilation—to sites in the imagination where resurrection of the body is worse than death. “Go back to the grave,” cries the father in “The Monkey’s Paw,” refusing the temptation to wish his dead son back in the flesh. While Jackie Torrence was telling this story in the cemetery in 1985, a drunken fan went wild, shouting, “Jackie, Jackie, I love you, Jackie!” with such mournful exuberance that she fell off the porch of the decrepit old house where she was standing, and had to be carried away. It was the last ghost telling in the Jonesborough cemetery, and a chilling glimpse of what it might be like to have the art of storytelling resurrected in the hungry flesh of American celebrity-worship.

After midnight, the crowd is released. It streams down the hill like a fleet of candles in the dark, burning with the light of an art which has just been struck to life. After a short night of dreams, the festival faithful resurrect into the light of the sacred telling. These two events, ghost telling and sacred telling, are twinned in the ritual structure of the festival, dark giving way to light, yang to yin. The stories told here all concentrate on positive images of spiritual experience. Revenants appear only to wipe a weeping eye and tell their loved ones they are at peace. Wailing and gnashing of teeth are stilled by a kind word or a gentle touch, from this world or the next. Gods and goddesses, saints and bodhisattvas play peekaboo from behind the fleshly masks that show to the world as bag ladies or simpletons. The holy fool sleeps forever in the divine mother's arms, and the sibilant whisper of palm rubbing palm would not disturb his sleep.

At the height of the revival period, the sacred telling was the climax of the festival for festival initiates, as the ghost storytelling was its climax for the merely curious. Many of those who streamed down the hill from the cemetery would not come back, but would go away satisfied with the metaphysical teasing of the ghost stories. Those who were waiting to find a redemptive vision in storytelling would return in the morning for the sacred telling. The spiritual worlds depicted on Saturday night were exciting precisely because they were sundered from this world by great gulfs of fear. The spiritual worlds depicted on Sunday morning were gently joined to this one by currents of love, mercy, forgiveness, and courage.

Like many another liminal rite, the trajectory of the festival moves downward into the dark in order to push the spirit up into the light. The revival preacher takes care to draw his eager audience into the steaming pit of hell before raising them into the dawn of salvation. The tribal initiate may be symbolically buried or dismembered before being reincorporated into his new status. At the storytelling revival event, once again, the symbolic protagonist of festival's ritual narrative is storytelling itself. Featured tellers and committed audience celebrate the sacrificial death of the folk art, its harrowing of the hell of our haunted imaginations, and its resurrection as a tool of social connectedness and spiritual healing. By our projected identification with and dedication to the storytelling form, we are moved to shed fears and doubts and take on some of the power demonstrated at the festival, for reincorporation into our own lives and home communities.

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